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# FXAMS

Singapore students once again came out tops in the International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma exams, according to results released last week, outshining their global peers. The Sunday

Times finds out why students here do so well in the two-year pre-university programme that Singapore joined in 2005, whether tuition and drilling play a part in their success, and how the IB prepares them for university and life.



Amelia Teng **Education Correspondent** 

Singapore students came out tops in the latest International Bacleased last Monday, outshining up on important topics."

Of the 99 students worldwide ucation said it has recorded a who attained the perfect score of nearly threefold increase in the 45 points in the exam last Novem- number of local IB students in the ber, more than half – 55 – were past five years. from schools in Singapore.

pre-university programme in dents often ask for help in the 2005, the Republic has surpassed coursework component – for inglobal standards, consistently pro-stance, in research methodology, scorers worldwide at the IB's No- or framing and generating argu-

Singapore accounted for 35 of 69 perfect scorers globally in 2019's November session. The year before, the figure was 38 out of 68.

Only a handful of local schools -Anglo-Chinese School (Independent), or ACS(I); St Joseph's Institution (SJI); School of the Arts Singapore (Sota); and Singapore Sports academic curriculum at Sota. School – offer the IB Diploma Programme (IBDP).

Students in the internationalschool arms of ACS, SJI and Hwa Chong also take the IB.

Aljunied Al-Islamiah, which saw pected grades," she said. its first batch of 25 students start the IBDP in 2019.

In total, 28 institutions in Singapore, including international schools like the Overseas Family School, offer the IB programme.

## WHY SINGAPORE ACES THE IB

fare well in the IB is that some of lection". the schools that offer the programme take in better students to pegin with, observers said, National Institute of Education

trenched culture of wanting to do drilling, and doing well requires well in exams in Singapore. We're deep and critical thinking. talking about the more prestigious schools where, early, all of the students are already highly motivated academically.

"That carries over whether you're in the A-level or IB track, because you know that at the end of the programme, you are gunning for university access, and students

would be very focused on that." SJI principal Adrian Danker said students come into the IB programme with strong academic foundations, whether from the Inregrated Programme or the Olevel track. "It gives them a head there are so many permutations of start and allows them to go deep nto the different subjects."

A growing enrichment industry could also be a factor in students success in the IB.

Tuition centre IB Super has had a 30 per cent increase in local IB students in the past four years, while another centre, Mindlab International, has seen a 20 per cent yearon-year increase in enrolment of local IB students in the past five

Mr Matthew Lee, Mindlab's programme director, said: "Most of the students come to get coaching calaureate (IB) diploma results re- in exam preparation and brushing

Mr Sean Lim, one of its tutors, Ever since it joined the two-year said: "We notice that local studucing more than half of the top application of academic theories

> Despite the uptick in IB tuition, IB Super's founder Bel Hwang said local schools also provide strong foundations for their students. She cited ACS(I)'s Integrated Pro-

> gramme, which prepares students in the first four years for the IBDP, and a similar integrated arts and "Our local students are generally

industrious and focused on meeting the numerous deadlines in IB schoolwork. They are also gradeconscious, and always do their The latest addition is Madrasah work with an eye on their ex-

Dr Yuen Wei Hao, director of on applying conceptual understudies for another tuition centre, EIB Education, reiterated the point that local schools which offer IB "typically have stronger cohorts of students... compared with the national average, as well as 20 per cent to 40 per cent of the good support from the schools, both in terms of the subject teach- exam makes up the rest of the One reason students here tend to ing and how to approach subject se-

About 20 per cent of sign-ups each year at his centre come from IB students at local schools. However, teachers said the IB don Jason Tan said: "There's an en- curriculum does not allow for

dinator, said: "There is no 10-year series for IB. Exam questions ren't repeated and do not encour-

'Knowing facts without real understanding won't get you anywhere. It's more about application

Mr Jarett Kan, ACS(I)'s director of affective curriculum, which covers student development and wellbeing, said: "We expose students tions, and they do practise. But questions, and no model answers. "There's also greater emphasis

Singapore students may be stellar performers, but in recent years, local schools have withheld the number of their top IB scorers.





International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme. He scored 42 points out of the maximum 45. PHOTO: MUIS

# Madrasah student scores high in IB despite juggling it with Islamic studies

**Jolene Ang** 

As a student at the Madrasah Aljunied Al-Islamiah, Abdul Hakam Nor Razak had to take 10 subjects as part of the Islamic curriculum at the religious school.

On top of that, he was enrolled in the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP). Early last week, the 18-year-old was one of 25 students in the ativity, activity and service.

standing to a variety of questions."

Research, along with forms of as-

sessment like oral recordings, is a

key aspect of the IB coursework

over two years, making up about

overall subject score. The final

students space to discover and pur-

sue their interests, through re-

Mr Tang said the 4,000-word ex-

tended essay component – akin to

a mini-thesis – gives students free-

dom to explore topics across

Mr Kan said: "Because students

get to choose their own research

questions, the motivation to find

"For example, in history last

year, I had students researching...

the reasons for low birth rates in

the reasons why the United States

went to war with Iraq in 2003."

**GOING BEYOND GRADES** 

Singapore during the 1970s, and

the answers is strong.

search topics of their choice.

Teachers said the IB also gives

madrasah who received their IB results. They are the pioneer batch in this programme, which began in January 2019.

Even while juggling it with his Islamic education, Hakam managed to score 42 points out of the maximum 45. He was the madrasah's top scorer. The IB curriculum consists of

isn't a chore for me. six subjects and three core components – namely theory of knowledge, an extended essay, and creabout the subjects."

In this last component, stugramme, Hakam said he likes that dents have to complete a project students' grades in the IBDP are related to those three concepts. Hakam's six chosen subjects were chemistry, mathematics,

Arabic, English, Malay literature ments that are kind of like a mini On how he did so well, he said: on something and do a write-up "I enjoy learning and studying areas of interest independently,

"During the holidays, I read up about science and maths, which supplemented my knowledge

Singapore

graduate

Nicholas

was able to

spread out his

International

Baccalaureate

(IB) Diploma

Programme

sports

coursework and

according to his

exam schedule

commitments

The triathlete

the usual two

years on the IB

route. PHOTO:

SPORTS SCHOOL

SINGAPORE

years instead of

spent three

This follows the Education Min-Sports School istry's practice of not releasing such information for other national examinations, in an effort to quell the fixation on academic re-Rachmadi, 19,

jolenezl@sph.com.sg

Father (Dr) Adrian said SJI chose the IB for its post-secondary track as its programme is in line with its sallian philosophy of developing haracter in students.

politics and English. He fre-

keeps track of global affairs.

and ran till 5pm.

months of school left.

quently reads news articles and

But juggling the IBDP and his Is-

lamic education was not easy, he

said. Over the two years, most school days started at 7.30am

While he has completed the

IBDP, his Islamic classes have not ended. He still has about two

Hakam said he was initially anx-

ious at the thought of being part

of the madrasah's pioneer IBDP

"We had no seniors to talk to

and seek advice from, and I was

also quite anxious about the

school's preparedness for the pro-

gramme – whether the teachers

had the right training and

whether I could get a good score."

The Islamic Religious Council

of Singapore (Muis) said the

IBDP complements the school-

based Islamic Studies curricu-

"The learning experience, train-

ing, exposure, research and inves-

tigation rigour, as well as commu-

nity service activities and engagements not only prepare students

for university life but also the nec-

essary thinking skills and perspec-

tives," said Muis, adding that these are critical for future reli-

Having completed the pro-

He added: "We also have assign-

thesis, where we have to research

"The IB allows us to explore our

and it was something I enjoyed."

gious scholars and leaders.

This Singapore obsession about erfect scores worries me, beause it puts extreme pressure on udents and parents," he said. "With all the extra components ie IB aims to nurture qualities like coming a better person, and

## LEARNING SKILLS FOR LIFE

While some students said they struggled initially with the independent style of learning in the IB programme, they adapted quickly. SJI graduate Portia Lim, 18, said: "I felt like I was thrown into the deep end at first. I found the curriculum very challenging, and it requires you to be consistent, meetng back-to-back deadlines.

"But I chose the IB after speaking to seniors who said it would preoare me well for university, and I dn't want to do something simicurriculum at Anglo-Chinese School (Independent), with ACS(I) graduate Lauren Tse, who says the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme pushed many students out of their comfort zones when they had to come up with questions themselves and consider different perspectives.

ST PHOTO: CHONG JUN LIANG

lar to the O levels again." Students and teachers said the IB's emphasis on self-directed learning and research skills is use

Mr Kan said every subject has a research component, which mirrors the nature and work of academics.

Students are exposed to thinking approaches across disciplines, beyond knowing subject matter, he said. "The world is so complex now, you need to have such think-

said: "It pushed a lot of us out of our comfort zones, when we had to come up with questions ourselves, consider different perspectives." For instance, in studying literature texts, students would also

ACS(I) graduate Lauren Tse, 18,

texts and economic conditions. Apart from academic skills, the IB programme also allows students to learn time management.

need to think about historical con-

Singapore Sports School graduate Nicholas Rachmadi, 19, said he could spread out his coursework and exam schedule according to his sports commitments. as he took up an extended IBDP path-

The triathlete spent three years instead of the usual two years on the IB route.

Singapore Sports School assistant vice-principal (academics) Lim Han Yong said the longer runway allows student-athletes to take more ownership of their time and do well in both sports and studies. "It also instils in them indepen-

dence and self-discipline." The IB also encourages student to think deeply beyond their stud

ies, said educators. Father Adrian said: "In the two years, students grow up and find their voice in the IB... They are al passionate about something, and it's not just about knowledge and skills. Some might take a gap year to do service learning projects over seas instead of going to university straight."

As part of IB, students need to take up creativity, activity and service projects, which are meant to be avenues for personal growth.

To fulfil those requirements, Lauren chose to give piano lessons, picked up frisbee skills, and planned and went on a trip to China to teach children. She intends to study liberal arts

and go into policymaking in future, with the concerns of underprivileged families in mind.

"The IB pushed us to think of communities outside school, instead of getting so caught up with our identities as students," she

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Additional reporting by Jolene Ang

# IB diploma and A levels: How the two routes differ

The International Baccalaureate as Anglo-Chinese School (Inde-Diploma Programme (IBDP) and the A levels are both two-yearlong programmes that cater November. mainly to students between 16 and 18 years old.

In Singapore, more students national schools in Singapore. tend to opt for the A-level route. In 2019, 12,405 students sat the na-A-level students are graded al-

which tend to be content-heavy. The IBDP is considered a less frequently chosen option. Last year, ing to a note on SJI's website. 2,228 students from Singapore, in-

most entirely on their final exams,

pendent) and St Joseph's Institution (SJI), sat the diploma exam in

Each year, there is another sitting in May, taken mainly by inter-

In the IBDP, the final IB exams account for about 70 per cent to 80 per cent of the total mark for each subject, while assignments assessed by teachers and checked by external examiners contribute the rest of the final grade, accord-

The curriculum places emphasis cluding those from schools such on the research processes of the

students, as well as on their infit students who are good at time language acquisition; individuals quiry and problem-solving skills. management, independent learn-Other key external assessments ing and research," he said.

are the theory of knowledge essay and the individual extended essay, which are completed by students over a specified period of that the IBDP mandates that stutime under teacher supervision.

Mr Sean Lim, a tutor at Quintes-

sential Education, which offers tu-

exams tend to be less challenging than the A levels. while science students tend to "Children who are more examsavvy might do better in the A-

choose economics, he said. studies in language and literature; level exams... The IB exams bene-

ition for IB students, said IB coverdents to take at least one contrastage is more extensive, but the final ing subject. Many arts students tend to choose mathematics,

jects across disciplinary areas.

National Institute of Education

don Jason Tan said one key differ-

ence between the two routes is

dents take a broader spread of sub-

The A-level route requires stu-

The IBDP has six subject groups:

still have a spread across various fields. Compared with what Alevel students take, it's a wider

and societies; sciences; mathemat-

choose courses from these six

ics; and the arts. Students can

However, they may opt to study

an additional sciences, individuals

and societies, or languages course,

Associate Professor Tan said:

"But even if you forgo the arts, you

instead of a course in the arts.

spread across at least five different subject areas."